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# ***Journal of Popular Music Studies***

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Volume 7 (1995)

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Peter Winkler

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Simon Jones

## Rocking the House: Sound System Cultures and the Politics of Space

The hegemony of the "live" group as the privileged mode of performance in rock and popular music has increasingly been challenged as other forms of musical activity have been recognized and legitimized, especially those which revolve around the reproduction and reception of *recorded* music. Recorded music, as a source of public entertainment, has long occupied a central place in African-American and Caribbean musical cultures, from U.S. Southern juke-joints in the 1930s to the Jamaican sound system and its counterparts in hip-hop culture and the Colombian "picós."<sup>1</sup> Such practices have been equally important in youth and gay cultures, from record hops and discos to the current proliferation of dance musics and club cultures in the forms of techno, house music, and their numerous subgenres.

There is now a growing body of literature on these various musical genres and formations. In much of this work, however, particularly on dance music, there is a tendency to treat these genres primarily as a series of key texts (records, song lyrics, musical forms) from which various discourses and ideologies — of "sexuality," "race," or the "body," for example — can be read off and decoded.<sup>2</sup> What tends to be missing from such accounts is a sense of the specific *practices* and institutions, and the particular *spaces* in which recorded music is reproduced, received, and used. In this paper, I want to suggest that these disparate formations are underpinned by common kinds of musical and cultural activities, and that

they increasingly assume similar technological and institutional configurations in the form of the *sound system*.<sup>3</sup> I want to look at how sound systems can become the focus of various musical, technological and social practices which serve to articulate and reproduce cultural space. I also want to examine what occurs when these institutions operate *outside* the boundaries of authorized, legitimate leisure space, and how they become subject to particular forms of social control and legal regulation.

## Adventures on the Wheels of Steel

The technical innovation of the phonograph brought with it cultural and aesthetic possibilities that had several long-term implications for the reproduction and reception of recorded music. As Steve Jones has pointed out, the possibility of storing musical performances on the phonogram freed them from the temporal and spatial confines of their initial production.<sup>4</sup> This opened up new possibilities, not only in terms of more flexible and mobile listening modes in different contexts, but also by transforming the moment of reproduction into a space of potential *re*-performance of recorded music. This potential was initially limited by the prohibitive price of phonographs, which confined their use to affluent middle-class households<sup>5</sup> and by the ways in which phonographs were marketed and intended for use in terms of a particular ideal of domestic bourgeois consumption and *private* audio space.<sup>6</sup>

As the relative price of phonographs fell, however, they became an important means of musical entertainment within working-class and Black communities. Phonographs were being used as sources of *public* entertainment as early as 1910 in Egypt. Indeed, as Manuel has shown, the public phonograph existed throughout the Middle East in the early part of the 20th century with mobile disk jockeys carrying phonographs throughout towns and villages playing records for a small fee.<sup>7</sup> By the 1930s, in African-American communities, the phonograph and jukebox had acquired a central importance as sources of musical entertainment both in roadhouse clubs and juke joints and at rent parties and private social occasions.<sup>8</sup> The possibilities of a public entertainment institution built around recorded music were developed even further in Jamaican



popular music in the form of the sound system. Sound systems emerged in the 1940s in working-class Black communities to supply music at parties and social events. Technically, early sound systems evolved out of an adaptation of "radiograms", large radio/gramophone players invariably of German manufacture. These radiograms were progressively expanded with the addition of separate turntables and speaker systems, and more powerful amplification. By the mid 1950s, the sound system had evolved into a sophisticated mobile entertainment institution and *the* principal site of musical practice in Jamaican popular music, rivaling and often superseding "live", vocal and instrumental stage performances in cultural importance. The sound system also represented a collectively owned cultural and technological resource, one that provided a cheaper and more flexible form of public musical entertainment than "live" stage performances.

Sound systems entailed the customizing of technologies, such as amplifiers, speakers, turntables and pre-mixers, to perform specific musical functions. These processes involved the application of informal technical and practical knowledge such as carpentry and electronics.<sup>9</sup> Speakers designed for use in public address systems, were adapted and customized to handle the reproduction of bass frequencies that have always been a central aesthetic in Jamaican popular music's "bass culture." Eighteen inch speakers were housed in purpose-built wardrobe-sized cabinets in sets of four or six. Treble, mid-range, and bass frequencies were separated and channeled into separate speaker systems for each frequency range, in a vastly expanded version of the domestic hi-fi system of woofer, mid range and tweeter.

The influence of Jamaican sound system culture on hip-hop has now been well documented.<sup>10</sup> Mediated through Jamaican communities in urban areas like Miami and New York, and through specific figures like the Jamaican émigré Kool Herc, several key technical and cultural innovations from the reggae sound system were incorporated into the emergent hip-hop culture of the South Bronx, including powerful amplification and size of speakers, clear separation of sound frequencies, and an enhancement of bass (a feature which later became particularly apparent in genres like "Miami bass").

Hip-hop sound systems developed their own specific processes of technological adaptation including the customizing of mixing devices and the use of records and turntables as performance instruments. Hip-hop DJs exploited the aesthetic potential of the 12" record, whose larger size than the 7" single gave DJs more material to manipulate manually in mixing and "scratching". The extended play of the 12", with its dub and instrumental portions, also invited supplementary creative input from rappers and MCs.

Many of the technologies developed initially in reggae sound systems have also been incorporated into dance-music culture. As a result, most sound systems now conform to a broadly similar technological configuration using standard equipment and preferred makes of amplifiers, speakers, and turntables like the Technics SL 1200. All sound systems involve the creative adaptation of hi-fi and playback systems, and the transformation of *domestic* hi-fi technologies into *public* performance instruments to serve particular musical and cultural needs and satisfy particular sound aesthetics. Such processes, as Rose has pointed out, involve making technologies oral and tactile, revising and manipulating them, in the case of reggae and hip-hop, to articulate Black cultural priorities.<sup>11</sup>

Sound-system and DJ cultures involve common kinds of procedures in which recorded sound is transformed and its reproduction turned into a live performance. The most fundamental of these procedures is *mixing*, now a standard practice in most DJing, which evolved out of the exigencies of maintaining the momentum between records and keeping audiences dancing.<sup>12</sup> Mixing has many genre-specific variants. These include the conventional disco aesthetic of creating a seamless flow of sound by carefully synchronizing the beats per minute of successive records, and various hip-hop DJ practices such as the "*breaks*" (cutting back and forth between the same portions of two records playing on different turntables), "*punch phasing*" (cutting in fragments and phrases, such as vocal parts, bass lines or rhythm sections, from one record across another), and "*scratching*" records, used as a percussion device to punctuate and add rhythmic and textual embellishment to recorded sound. Recorded music is also *processed* at the point of its transmission through equalizers, pre-mixers, and digital delay units. In reggae sound systems, these technologies enable the "dub"



process to be recreated live. Sound effects can be dubbed over recorded music, while individual components of the musical mix, such as drums, vocals, guitars, and particularly the bass, can be processed or retracted, then reintroduced into the mix. A related practice in reggae culture is that of interrupting a popular song during its opening bars, pulling up the needle and cutting the record back to the beginning. Many aspects of these dub processes have progressively been incorporated into hip-hop and dance-music cultures in general. Their influence is detectable in early house music, where DJs enhanced the bass lines and rhythm tracks of disco and r'n'b classics by mixing in their own bass lines and percussion produced on drum machines or through sequenced keyboard patterns.<sup>13</sup> Techno DJs similarly draw on the aesthetics of dub in the overlaying of sampled sound fragments, voices, and other effects over recorded music. The characteristic practice of retracting the bass line or drums for several bars at a time, then reintroducing them into the mix, a procedure developed initially in reggae sound-system culture, is also now widely used in dance music to create a sense of drama and anticipation within the audience, and to enhance the pleasures of listening and dance.

The art of *selection* is a central aesthetic of DJ practice. The choice of which records to play and in what order can be crucial in creating a particular dramaturgy and narrative structure for an event. Through selection practices, the DJ attempts to "work" the crowd, leading it through mood shifts and building climaxes and crescendos over the course of an event. By juxtaposing records with particular musical and lyrical content, the DJ can also set up intertextual meanings between and across selections. These practices are particularly sophisticated in reggae culture. Here the meanings of songs can be underlined or expanded through their counter position. Songs can thereby be made to comment on, critique or "answer" one another. The practice of "versioning" similarly involves juxtaposing different stylistic and musical variants ("versions") of the same drum and bass arrangement ("riddim" in reggae, or "beats" in hip-hop). The reviving of timeless originals, standards, and "old school" tunes is a way of paying homage to respected forerunners and predecessors. Here, the DJ functions as a musical "curator," as "master of records" and "archivist" of sound.



In reggae and hip-hop sound systems, by far the most important means through which the reproduction of recorded music is rendered "live" are the specifically *oral* practices of "toasting" and "rapping."<sup>14</sup> These practices originated, in the live dance-hall context, as ways of rhythmically embellishing recorded music through vocal improvisations and rhymes delivered in time to the rhythm of the music. Style of delivery, rhyming ability and discursive and rhythmic "flow," remain central aesthetic criteria by which the performances of rappers and DJs continue to be judged. In the most sophisticated forms of these practices, the voice itself becomes a percussion device. In "human beat-boxing," for example, an individual rapper or group of rappers performing in synchronization imitates and literally reproduces, orally, the sounds and rhythms of a drum kit or drum machine. The delivery of recorded music is also embellished through live singing by DJs and performers who superimpose their own melodies over the instrumental rhythm tracks and dub versions of songs.

DJs and rappers also serve as public voices for their audiences in the dance context, their status as public performers signified in their adopted names, aliases, and personae.<sup>15</sup> Delivery styles may vary from the more spontaneous, improvised stream-of-consciousness style in which rhymes, puns, wordplays, and couplets are delivered in "freestyle," to more structured narratives and discourses. In the live context, rappers and DJs engage with the discourses of recorded music, using particular song lyrics as sources of inspiration, commenting or amending them, for example in reggae toasting, or interjecting one's own lyrics over those of the existing record in the "mic checkin'" or "regulatin'" style characteristic of Miami hip-hop.<sup>16</sup> The DJ also engages the crowd directly through exhortations and call-and-response exchanges, giving "name checks," "shout outs," and "special dedications" to individuals and groups in the audience. These naming procedures serve to confer status, grace and public recognition on those in the audience and are part of the DJ's ritual function as peace keeper and mediator of tensions within the dance.<sup>17</sup>

It is in these spaces of performance that DJs and rappers practice their art, and hone their skills in competition with other DJs, at local dances, house parties, amateur nights, talent shows, and jam ses-

sions. At many of these smaller-scale events, the microphone is often "open" to would-be rappers, MCs, and toasters in the audience. In the formative years of hip-hop, for example, DJs like Grandmaster Flash would invite spontaneous audience participation by attaching an open mike to their sets.<sup>18</sup>

## Space Bass

Music, in a key sense, is sound in movement through time and space in specific, organized patterns. If this is so, then a major part of its power *as music* must lie in its temporal and spatial qualities. These qualities give musical forms and practices the apparent ability to articulate and actively organize time and space through their rhythms and tempos, and their melodic and harmonic textures. These abilities are particularly clear when one considers forms such as dance music, which are produced for a particular reception context (the dance floor) and are, as a result, encoded with particular aesthetic and formal qualities, whether the 4/4 rhythms of disco and HiNRG, the accelerated beats of techno, the bass patterns of reggae and hip-hop, or the polyrhythmic layers of house. The affective power of these forms is enhanced in the reception context by their powerful amplification, which renders them a distinctly physical impact, enabling dancers literally to "feel" the music. In these contexts, audiences have an immediate bodily relation to the pulses, rhythm, and structures of recorded music.

These musical elements combine with the various oral, ritual, and transformative practices of DJ and sound-system cultures to create an aural, acoustic space for listeners and dancers. In forms such as house and techno, for example, rhythms, bass lines, sampled sound effects, and voices work in conjunction with laser lighting and the psychological and physiological effects of drugs like ecstasy to create a sensual environment which envelops the listener/dancer. The net effect of these practices is to create a particular temporal and spatial structure which dancers enter into and temporarily inhabit. This explains dance music's apparent ability to stop and suspend the conventional time passing outside the dance floor context. Langlois has remarked on the ability of house and techno to create an effect of "temporal distortion" within listeners, and to



twist their sense of time and space.<sup>19</sup> Dance music, as Frith has argued, intensifies the experience of the present, the sense of "now" on the dance-floor where music is experienced as a continuous flow of sound in which one song dissolves into the next.<sup>20</sup> In these contexts, as Frith has suggested, music "compels our immediate bodily involvement in an organization of time that the music itself controls".<sup>21</sup> The active, participatory character of audiences in these spaces makes them an integral part of the performance and the event as a whole. Audiences respond and dancers express feedback not only bodily through dance responses, but often vocally too, through cheering, whistling, "barking," and other forms of vocal appreciation. Through dance, moreover, the audience can itself become a performance spectacle in the more choreographed and acrobatic individual and group dance moves.

The space of the dance-floor is always inscribed with particular meanings and connotations in different formations, meanings that are invariably age, race, and gender specific. Within Black musical cultures such as reggae and hip-hop, the dance-floor can represent a space of solidarity, survival and affirmation of communal sensibilities. The space of the sound system can also be important as a defense enclave within a dominant white culture, a space in which the aesthetics, philosophies and pleasures of expressive Black cultures can be affirmed and celebrated. In sound-system dances and blues parties, as Gilroy argues, symbolic communities are constructed by means of oral and musical rituals which act to carnivalize the spatial and temporal relations of the dominant culture.<sup>22</sup> Within these spaces, practices like versioning — the reviving of timeless originals and intercutting past into present music — serve not only as ways of paying respect to important predecessors in Black musical traditions, but as ways of articulating a sense of continuity and heritage within those traditions by working around popular memory and shared musical knowledge. The use of patois and Black vernacular in practices like rapping and toasting works similarly to create an inclusive sense of community in the immediate audience by defining the specifically discursive and linguistic boundaries of a "racial" collectivity.<sup>23</sup> The sense of tradition and community articulated in these spaces, and their characteristic musical and cultural practices, can also be inclusive

of non-Black participants. In areas of urban Britain, for example, the leisure spaces and institutions of Black communities have long been inhabited and shared by adjacent social groups, particularly white working-class and Asian youth.<sup>24</sup>

Similar senses of "tradition" and continuity can be found articulated in gay culture through the playing of acknowledged gay dance music "classics," "standards," and "anthems" in disco and genres like HiNRG and house. Within gay culture, the dance floor can similarly be a site of community and social survival, a safe haven in which homosexuality can be celebrated and explored. As one London promoter of a gay dance club, "Queer Nation," explained, club life is a central component of gay cultural expression: *It is gay expression. It's where people meet their extended gay family, it's where they meet their lovers. It's very much an extended family thing, that's what gay life is about, your sisters and brothers.*"<sup>25</sup>

In rave culture the space of the dance floor is articulated in terms which are defined against the perceived sexual "cattle markets" represented by mainstream discos and against the exclusivity of the more elitist forms of club culture.<sup>26</sup> Rave culture, Langlois suggests, represents a shift away from the space of the dance-floor as an arena predominantly of sexual contact and display, towards a space in which sociability, social exchange, and sensuality in physical contact are more valued.<sup>27</sup> In rave culture, dancing is as much about the pleasures of bodily expression as it is a vehicle of courtship and sexual encounter. As Tagg points out, this is partly signaled in the fact that participants tend to both arrive and leave raves in mixed groups, rather than pairing off into individual couples during the course of the evening.<sup>28</sup> McRobbie sees rave culture as a space in which softer, more malleable forms of masculinity than dominant modes, are expressed and explored. In these, young men are able enter into relationships with their own bodies which are more tactile, sensuous and less focused around sexual gratification than in conventional male sexualities.<sup>29</sup>

These shifts in social behavior within the space of the dance floor, have been seen partly as the result of a post-AIDS social awareness and caution about sexual encounters, and partly as a



result of the effects of drugs such as ecstasy, widely used as a recreational drug in rave culture in Europe and North America, whose effects reduce social inhibitions and the need for private space and create an empathic, positive form of consciousness.<sup>30</sup>

While the sound system represents something of a mobile cultural space that can be recreated in different institutional contexts — from night clubs, bars, and private houses to warehouses — such spaces do not exist in a social or economic vacuum. They depend on, and are supported by, wider social networks, modes of organization, and infrastructures of informal cultural production. These spaces and institutions invariably exist as part of larger “scenes” — formations and coalitions of DJs, dancers, and followers which crystallize around specific musical styles and genres.<sup>31</sup> While these “scenes” may coalesce around specific musical styles in a given space or locality, they do not always mirror fixed geographical “communities” in the conventional sense. They can also take more fluid forms, in which disparate participants are linked, through wider spatial networks and infrastructures of musical production and distribution, in shared tastes and common allegiances to particular scenes and genres.<sup>32</sup>

Sound systems also invariably exist within small-scale local economies. They depend on the entrepreneurial activities of promoters who play a crucial role in securing locations and equipment, and in organizing events. Sound systems themselves have their own particular sources of revenue and modes of self-funding. These can range from voluntary cash donations at dances and raves and nominal entrance charges, to revenue from sales of food and alcohol and more organized forms of ticket selling. Sound systems also have their own communication and publicity networks. The preferred medium of publicity and advertising of forthcoming events in sound-system cultures is the handbill or flyer. Potential participants are also kept informed by other modes of communication including systems of telephone numbers and answering machines, used especially in the rave scene to maintain secrecy from the police, the Internet, fanzines, and, in Britain, pirate radio broadcasts.

Sound systems are also often tied into local infrastructures of recording and distribution through which music is produced and

circulated to DJs. Sound systems rely on the work of producers and musicians recording music in small, DIY studios with keyboard and computer-based instruments and appliances for particular scenes and reception contexts.

Sound systems are also the focus of specifically *social* networks and have their own informal modes of organization and divisions of labor. These are particularly elaborate in reggae culture, where roles and responsibilities are often delegated out to specific individuals, such as “selector,” “operator,” and speaker box carriers, and in rave culture, where sound systems are often collectively run and organized. These social networks extend outwards embracing wider formations of core followers, helpers, and supporters. The “posse” in reggae and the “crew” in hip-hop, for example, operate as local support systems and important focal points of identity and affiliation.<sup>33</sup> These informal groupings may include coteries of DJs, rappers, and teams of dancers who attach themselves to a particular sound system, rehearsing moves and routines with DJs who might produce special mixes for them.<sup>34</sup>

These social networks often extend out of existing peer-group, friendship, and neighborhood affiliations, a feature particularly apparent in hip-hop culture which emerged partly out of African-American and Puerto Rican male youth peer groups and gang structures in specific locales of the South Bronx and Harlem. Sound systems in Afro-Caribbean communities similarly tend to draw their own “posses” of followers from particular neighborhoods and “play out” in their own local communities and “territories”.<sup>35</sup>

Such networks have taken more explicit political forms in organizations like hip-hop’s Zulu Nation with its attempts to rearticulate inter-gang rivalries and violence around musical practices, dance, and graffiti writing. Sound system cultures can also form a basis for constructing *pan-ethnic* and cross-cultural affiliations and identities. In Britain this has occurred most noticeably around Asian hip-hop and dance-music scenes which draw in second-and third-generation young British Asians from diverse ethnic and religious origins and backgrounds.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, in Southern California, a Chicano hip-hop and dance music culture has evolved around “crews” of DJs, promoters, and followers who organize themselves around an ideology of “Raza” unity signaled



in the names adopted by these groups such as Hispanic Tribe, Latins, and Vilans.<sup>37</sup>

### Fighting for the Right to Party

These scenes have always inhabited a range of different commercial and institutional settings — including mainstream clubs on particular nights of the week (such as gay or women's nights, reggae or house nights) set up by particular DJs and promoters, particular rooms within those clubs, and various "underground" and "alternative" clubs on the fringes of the mainstream. Many of these latter clubs have a temporary and precarious existence, bedeviled by city zoning laws, building and fire codes, and liquor licensing regulations.<sup>38</sup> The scenes that inhabit these spaces are themselves highly fluid, with clienteles and taste groups shifting from club to club and space to space, and with clubs constantly opening, closing, and changing their DJs, music, and dress policies.

This sphere of authorized commercial institutions and spaces, however, has never been able to completely exhaust or encompass the sheer range of musical activities that occur around sound-system and DJ cultures. The possibilities of musical practice and pleasure within these spaces have been limited by various legal, economic, and social constraints. These include *external* regulations such as noise abatement laws, licenses for public entertainment and dancing, and liquor licensing laws which restrict hours of operation and bring clubs under closer state scrutiny and police supervision. They also include various *internal* regulations operating within these institutions in the form of dress codes and restrictions, management and security practices, constraints on drug consumption, admission and cover charges, and selective door policies in the form of racist and sexist "quotas" and screening of potential patrons.

For people of color, the mainstream, commercial leisure sphere has long been the site of de facto racist discrimination and segregation. Such practices have been particularly visible in the exercising of informal racist quotas in club admission policies and racially exclusionary booking policies around Black music concerts, most recently around rap. By refusing to insure an act, or by imposing

extremely high premiums on venue owners, insurance companies can make it impossible for venues, already nervous about rap, to put on concerts or book acts. The net effect of these policies, as Rose has shown, has been to freeze rap out of most large and medium sized performance venues.<sup>39</sup>

Exclusionary and discriminatory policies such as these, along with the inability of commercial leisure spaces to cater for the musical and cultural needs of different publics and taste groups, have ensured the existence of a sphere of cultural and musical spaces outside of these authorized, commercial institutions. These have included a range of informal, non-commercial social and civil functions such as private parties, wedding receptions, birthday celebrations where recorded music is provided by a DJ or sound system. But they have also included a whole sphere of unauthorized spaces which exist on the fringes of legality.

In answer to the institutional racism that has pervaded the mainstream leisure sphere, Black communities in both Britain and North America have created their own autonomous cultural and leisure spaces out of a network of private houses (such as the basement "rent party," the "blues" and house party) and public, municipal spaces (town halls and community centers secured for sound-system dances and other social events).<sup>40</sup> In early hip-hop culture, for example, dances were initially held in school gyms, community centers, parks, and street "block parties" in the South Bronx and Harlem.

Raves evolved similarly, in Britain, as alternatives to the exclusive, expensive, and regulated spaces of the mainstream, commercial club circuit, attracting participants with their all-night hours of operation which skirted around the legal curfew on night life imposed by licensing laws.<sup>41</sup> These early raves were modeled partly on the all-night "blues parties" held in Black communities. The term "rave" itself derived from reggae culture, where to go "raving" meant, in Black vernacular, to go to an all-night party or "blues." Raves were initially held in a range of unauthorized spaces such as apartment blocks, derelict or vacant buildings, squats, and warehouses. As police surveillance and monitoring of these spaces increased, however, "raves" moved out of the limelight of urban areas into a range of more obscure, semi-secret, and often rural,



locations — disused airfields and aircraft hangers, derelict churches, open fields and private gardens. These culminated in the mass open-air raves of 1988 and 1989, which frequently drew crowds of 10,000 or more participants.<sup>42</sup> Regional rave scenes also developed in the United States, particularly in areas like Southern California, where the climate was conducive to outdoor events, and where rave culture catered to young people's needs for their own leisure spaces outside of mainstream clubs. *URB* magazine articulated something of the autonomous, DIY spirit that motivated this culture:

"Pissed-off because almost everything is 21 and up? Tired of paying \$10 or more to dance? No one plays your music? Wanna drink after 2 am? Do it yourself! Be careful. Scout your location well, keep an eye on everything to make sure the party goes smoothly and most of all — keep it safe! Just know what you're getting into, have a good story for the cops and know a back-door out!"<sup>43</sup>

These unauthorized leisure spaces have always been constructed as a social problem and a public "nuisance" by local state authorities, such as the police, and within media discourses. As Frith has shown, young people's public cultural and leisure activities have long presented a problem of social management for the state and various moral entrepreneurs.<sup>44</sup> The leisure institutions of gays and Black communities, in particular, have also long been the object of moral panics, articulated around various themes, including their unregulated character, their unorthodox hours of operation, their "noise," their impingement on rational leisure time, and the sexual relations practiced within them. The Black community's musical and leisure spaces have been constructed as sites of "criminality," drug consumption, and prostitution.<sup>45</sup> Large public gatherings of young Blacks in Britain and the United States have consistently been regarded as a "threat" to social order, reflected in media coverage of rap and reggae concerts inflected by racialized images of "Black violence" and "criminality." "Acid house" and "rave" became the objects of similar kinds of moral panics in the popular British media in the 1980s and '90s as sites of drug-taking and unsupervised youth cultural activities.<sup>46</sup>

These discourses and moral panics have fed into and legitimized various forms of social control, discipline, and surveillance by state authorities. In Britain, there is a well-documented history of over-policing and harassment of Black cultural spaces and leisure institutions manifested in recurrent police raids on youth clubs, blues parties, and other Black cultural and musical events.<sup>47</sup> Similar histories of institutional policing of Black musical spaces and events can be charted in African-American communities, particularly in the harassment and regulation of rap concerts.<sup>48</sup>

These disciplinary regimes took a particularly draconian turn in police actions against raves in Britain in the late 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>49</sup> Amongst other measures, such actions have included raiding the homes of party organizers; setting up roadblocks and cordoning off areas in the vicinity of raves; altering road signposts to misdirect traffic and prevent partygoers from reaching their destinations; random stop and searches; mass arrests and overnight detention of party goers; confiscation and destruction of equipment; serving injunctions on promoters, ticket agents, and individual DJs to prevent them from organizing or playing at events, the prosecution of sound system members and party organizers,<sup>50</sup> and even the setting up of an "Acid House" Intelligence Unit by Kent police to scan pirate radio broadcasts and monitor fanzines.<sup>51</sup>

These disciplinary and regulatory measures have occasionally resulted in bitter and violent confrontations with police. There is a long history of such confrontations, for example, between police and young Black people in Britain, focused around sound-system dances, house parties, and street carnivals where heavy policing has provoked mass resistance from young Blacks on a number of occasions. Heavy-handed policing of raves has also provoked bitter resistance from partygoers with forced entry into events resulting in pitched battles between ravers and police in riot gear.<sup>52</sup>

There is a similar history of struggle around police harassment of gay discos and clubs. One of the key moments in the emergence of the gay rights movement in the United States was the struggle around the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in Greenwich Village raided by police in 1969. The resistance of gay men displayed at Stonewall became a symbolic departure point and a key signifier in the history of gay struggle and organization.<sup>53</sup>



These actions have been legitimized by various legal pretexts, from unlicensed sales of alcohol, noise abatement laws, and environmental protection codes, to unlicensed uses of premises for public entertainment and dancing, and general public order statutes such as "breach of the peace." In Britain, police powers to restrict raves were widened and strengthened in 1990 with the passing of new legislation specifically aimed at such events in the form of the Entertainment (Increased Penalties) Act which increased the fines for holding unlicensed private entertainment for financial gain.<sup>54</sup> These legal restrictions have been further expanded in the Criminal Justice and Public Order bill, which grants police the power to stop individuals within a five-mile exclusion zone of a target event believed to be making their way to that event. The bill also gives the police formal powers to disperse groups of ten or more people if the police "reasonably believe" those people are waiting for or setting up a rave, and to confiscate sound equipment and vehicles. The penalties for such infringements include up to three months imprisonment or fines of 2,500 pounds.<sup>55</sup>

The bill is noteworthy as the first piece of legislation that attempts to define a "rave" as "a gathering on land in the open air of 100 or more persons to which amplified music is played during the night." The bill also attempts to delineate "music" as "sound wholly or predominantly characterized by the emission of a succession of repetitive beats."<sup>56</sup>

More serious perhaps than this enshrining of rave culture in legal discourse is the Bill's infringement of civil liberties by restricting freedom of movement, association, and peaceful assembly, and by formally extending and legitimizing police powers and strategies of spatial control, many of which were first deployed in the miners strike of 1984.

These disciplinary and regulatory practices raise serious questions about access to, and policing of public cultural and leisure space. Such practices represent an attack on the very notion of unregulated, public, communal leisure spaces and have, accordingly, become a site of increasing social struggle and contestation.<sup>57</sup> As Berland suggests, drawing on the work of Lefebvre, these forms of policing and control are part of broader patterns of economic and political management of urban space which are

endangering and suppressing people's fundamental rights — in particular, the "right to the town" and the "right to be different" and not to be forcibly classified into categories determined by homogenizing powers.<sup>58</sup>

\* \* \* \* \*

In examining these various sound-system and DJ- based cultures, I do not wish simply to endorse or unproblematically celebrate them as inherently oppositional or "alternative" formations. Elements of such tendencies certainly exist in some of the writing on DJ cultures and dance music, particularly in the romanticization of these formations as democratic, collective cultures. Some commentators find evidence of this in the lack of individual star figures in dance music culture and the relative absence in these scenes of ideologies of musical virtuosity characteristic of rock culture.<sup>59</sup> There is also a tendency to uncritically accept these scenes' ideologies and self accounts at face value, particularly in the construction of dance music as an "authentic," "underground" culture, or as a utopian space of "unity" in which social and sexual categories, of Black and white, straight and gay, are temporarily transcended.<sup>60</sup>

The temptation to romanticize these scenes in these ways, however, must be resisted. Such accounts need to be balanced by recognizing the various tensions and contradictions at work within many of these formations. The notion of dance musics and DJ cultures as necessarily more democratic and collective than rock needs to be underscored by acknowledging the discourses of connoisseurship and esotericism which pervade many key aspects of DJ culture and practice.<sup>61</sup> Within these discourses, the figure of the DJ is venerated as one of "creative hero" and "individual genius," a figure seen to possess neo-mystical knowledge and abilities to select music and control crowds. DJ culture, moreover, is not without its own particular star system, evidenced by the mythologizing and spotlighting of internationally known, individual star DJs who frequently "tour" North America and Europe.

DJing, moreover, is far from being an open and democratic practice. It remains, along with rapping and toasting, heavily



male-dominated, despite the small, but slowly increasing, number of women DJs, rappers and toasters. Sound-system cultures in general are also constructed as masculine spheres, despite a small handful of all-female crews of promoters and sound system operators. In rave, for example, young women, as McRobbie notes, are far less involved in the cultural production of the scene than are young men.<sup>62</sup> These gendered exclusions are the result partly of deeply rooted sexist ideologies and practices which articulate masculinity with technical knowledge and expertise, and partly of gender-segregated processes of skill acquisition and apprenticeship, both of which serve to exclude women from the production and technical side of these cultures.<sup>63</sup>

The romanticization of sound-system and dance-music cultures as utopian or oppositional spaces needs to be offset by a sense of the social differences, power relations, and subordinations that exist within these scenes. Social divisions are reproduced both within and between these scenes, as Thornton has observed, through distinctions and differences that operate around notions of "authenticity," qualities of "hipness" and exclusivity, and the possession of subcultural capital, manifested in knowledge of music and DJs, in dress codes and friendship networks.<sup>64</sup> As Straw notes, dance music spaces are sites of fragmentation, characterized by the marking of boundaries and differences around vectors of age, class, gender, race, and sexual orientation, as well as codes of sexual behavior and dance, audience receptiveness to innovation and the differing roles of DJs (for example as taste leaders or taste reflectors).<sup>65</sup> Various power relations and exclusions are enacted and reproduced around these vectors, in tensions, for example, around age, between "old" and "new" school participants, and around gender and sexual orientation, in the exclusion and subordination of women, gays, and lesbians within particular scenes such as hip-hop and across large areas of dance music. Power is also exercised and reproduced in the spatial relations of the dance floor itself in the demarcation and positioning of the DJ away from the space of the floor and the crowd (in the booth or behind the control tower) according to varying degrees of visibility and accessibility.<sup>66</sup> The communal and anti-commercial ideology of rave culture is also problematized by the increasing professionalization and entrepreneurialism of rave

promotion, signaled by increasingly expensive tickets, heavy-handed security, the difficulties of regularly staging large-scale, unauthorized events, and the ensuing loss of intimacy between DJs and audiences at such events.

Despite these very real tensions and contradictions, however, these scenes remain important, culturally and politically, as skeletal frameworks of alternative, albeit fleeting and contradictory, "public spheres." They are significant as spaces in which particular musical practices and relations of cultural production and consumption can be potentially enacted against the current dominant trend in the leisure industry to confine listening and consumption to particular, ideal forms. At the core of such forms lies a particular mode of individualized, private, domestic entertainment and "relaxation," one that is organized increasingly around pay-per-view and screen-based models of consumption in the space of the electronic "home theater."

In opposition to these tendencies, these scenes and formations represent spaces in which consumption is turned outwards, through social relations which de-prioritize the use of music by isolated, individual consumers and which transform the reproduction and reception of recorded music into spaces of performance, sociability and *collective* consumption.<sup>67</sup> In these spaces, alternative public cultural spaces are temporarily brought into being for the duration of an event, spaces in which audiences and dancers are connected both to each other and to DJs and performers, through dialogical relations in which taste affiliations and affective investments can be shared and celebrated.<sup>68</sup> These formations are important as spaces of cultural autonomy for subordinated and relatively marginalized groups — particularly gays, working class young people, and Black and ethnic communities. These formations are driven by similar struggles for autonomous cultural and musical spaces, spaces that are free from oppressive regulation and surveillance, spaces in which alternative identities, social relations, and modes of being to those represented by work, domesticity, or heterosexuality, might be explored, shared, and celebrated.

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## Notes

1. Deborah Pacini-Herandez, "The Picó Phenomenon in Cartagena, Colombia", *America Negra*, no. 6, 1993, pp69-115.
2. Such approaches are most clearly exemplified in the accounts of disco and dance music offered by the following; Carolyn Krasnow, "Fear and Loathing in the 1970s: Race, Sexuality, and Disco", *Stanford Humanities Review*, vol 3, no 3, 1993: pp. 37-45; Ross Harley, "Beat in the System", in Tony Bennett et al (eds.), *Rock and Popular Music: Politics, Policies, Institutions*. Routledge, New York 1993, pp. 210-230; Walter Hughes, "In the Empire of the Beat: Discipline and Disco", in Andrew Ross and Tricia Rose (eds.), *Microphone Fiends: Youth Music and Youth Culture*, Routledge, New York 1994, pp. 147-157.
3. I use "sound system" here to refer to a musical institution comparable, technically, to a mobile disco or public address system but invariably much more powerful and sophisticated. Implicit in the notion of a sound system is the central activity of publicly reproducing and *transforming* recorded music by means of various socializing rituals and practices.
4. Steve Jones, *Rock Formations*, Sage, Newbury Park CA, 1992.
5. Evan Eisenberg, *The Recording Angel*. Picador, London 1987.
6. Holly Kruse, "Early Audio Technology and Domestic Space", *Stanford Humanities Review*, vol 3, no 3, 1993, pp. 1-14.
7. Peter Manuel, *Popular Music of the Non-Western World*, Oxford University Press, New York 1988, p. 146.
8. Jeff Todd Titon, *Early Downhome Blues* University of Illinois Press, Urbana 1977; Albert Goldman, *Disco*, Hawthorn Books, New York 1978.
9. Simon Jones, "Music and Symbolic Creativity", in Paul Willis (ed.), *Common Culture*, Open University Press, Milton Keynes 1990, pp. 59-83
10. Steven Hager, *Hip-Hop*, St Martin's Press, New York 1984; Dick Hebdige, *Cut'n'Mix: Culture, Identity and Caribbean Music*, Comedia,

- London 1987; Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, Wesleyan University Press, Hanover 1994; S.H. Fernando, *The New Beats*, Doubleday, New York 1994; David Toop, *The Rap Attack: African Jive to New York Hip-Hop*, Pluto Press, London 1985.
11. Rose, *op. cit.*, p. 78
  12. Daniel Hadley, "Ride the Rhythm: Two approaches to DJ Practice," *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, no 5, 1993, pp. 58-67.
  13. Greg Kot, "House", *Chicago Tribune*, Aug. 19, 1990, pp. 4-6.
  14. The term "DJ" when applied to reggae sound systems is used interchangeably here with that of "toaster", reflecting the connotations of the term in reggae culture. In reggae sound system culture there is no direct equivalent to the figure of the "DJ" in hip-hop and dance music cultures. The functions of the DJ are divided between the "selector" who chooses records and manipulates the turntable, and the "operator" who runs the amplifiers, equalizers and other mixing devices.
  15. Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't no Black in the Union Jack*, Hutchinson, London 1987.
  16. *The Source*, no 54, March, 1994.
  17. Hebdige, *op cit.*
  18. Rose, *op. cit.*, p. 54.
  19. Tony Langlois, "Can you Feel it? DJs and House Music Culture in the UK", *Popular Music*, no 11, 1992, pp. 229-239.
  20. Simon Frith, *Sound Effects*, Constable, London 1983, p. 246.
  21. Simon Frith, "Towards an Aesthetic of Popular Music", in Richard Leppert, (ed.), *Music and Society: the Politics of Composition, Performance and Reception*, Cambridge University, Cambridge 1987, pp. 133-149. (p. 142)



22. Gilroy, *op. cit.*
23. *Ibid.*
24. Simon Jones, *Black Culture, White Youth: The Reggae Tradition from JA to UK*, Macmillan, Basingstoke 1988.
25. *Generator*, no 19, April, 1994, p. 25.
26. Barbara Bradby, "Sampling Sexuality: Gender, Technology and the Body in Dance Music", *Popular Music*, no 12, 1993, pp. 155-176.
27. Langlois, *op. cit.*
28. Philip Tagg, "From Refrain to Rave: The Decline of Figure and the Rise of Ground", *Popular Music*, no 13, 1994, pp. 209-222.
29. Angela McRobbie, "Shut Up and Dance: Youth Culture and Changing Modes of Femininity", *Cultural Studies*, no 7, 1993, pp. 406-426.
30. Steve Redhead, "The Politics of Ecstasy", in Steve Redhead, (ed.), *Rave Off.*, pp. 7-27.
31. Will Straw, "Systems of Articulation, Logics of Change: Communities and Scenes in Popular Music", *Cultural Studies*, no 5, 1991, pp. 368-388.
32. Mark Fenster, "Queer Punk Fanzines: Identity, Community, and the Articulation of Homosexuality and Hardcore", *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, no 17, 1993, pp. 73-94.
33. Rose, *op.cit.* p. 34
34. Marla Donato, "On the House", *Chicago Tribune*, July 11, 1990, pp. 19-20.
35. Les Back, "Coughing up Fire: Sound Systems in South-East London". *New Formations* no 5, 1987, pp. 141-152.
36. Gilroy, *op cit.*
37. A scene covered in *Streetbeat* magazine, see especially issue no 5,

38. See the shift towards "smart" clubs which attempt to side step such regulations by providing a non-alcoholic "juice bar".
39. Rose, *op.cit.*
40. Jones, 1988, *op.cit.*
41. Hillegonda Rietveld, "Living the Dream", in Steve Redhead, (ed.), *Rave Off*, pp. 41-78.
42. Antonio Melechi, "The Ecstasy of Disappearance", in Steve Redhead, (ed.), *Rave Off*, pp. 29-40.
43. *URB*, no 33, December/January, 1993, p. 103.
44. Frith, *Sound Effects*, *op.cit.*
45. Jones, 1988, *op.cit.*
46. Sarah Thornton, "Moral Panic: The Media and British Rave Culture", in Andrew Ross and Tricia Rose, (eds.), *Microphone Fiends*, Routledge, New York 1994.
47. Jones, 1988, *op.cit.*
48. Rose, *op.cit.*
49. An indication of the scale of these activities was given by an Association of Chief Police Officers Report which documented that over 2,000 people were arrested in some 250 public order disturbances between 1987-1988 (Redhead, *op.cit.* p. 4).
50. Members of Spiral Tribe, a sound system that provided music at a mass rave near Castlemorton in May 1990, were arrested, charged with causing a "public nuisance" then subsequently acquitted after a lengthy and well-publicized trial.
51. *Guardian*, 30 January, 1990, p. 10.
52. *Guardian*, 8 May, 1992, p. 6.



53. Martin Duberman, *Stonewall. Plume*, New York, 1994.
54. *Sunday Times*, 21 June, 1992, p. 5.
55. Joy Press, "The Killing of Crusty", *Spin*, October, 1994, pp. 69-76.
56. *The Times*, Oct 11, 1994, p. 3.
57. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1989.
58. Jody Berland, "Radio Space and Industrial Time: Music Formats, Local Narratives and Technological Mediation," *Popular Music*, no 9, 1 9 9 3, pp. 179-192; Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1991.
59. Terry Bloomfield, "It's Sooner Than You Think, or Where Are We in the History of Rock Music?" *New Left Review*, no 190, 1991, pp. 59-81.
60. Bradby, *op.cit.*
61. Straw, Will. "The Booth, The Floor and The Wall: Dance Music and the Fear of Falling." *Public*, no. 8, 1993, pp. 169-182.
62. McRobbie, *op.cit.*
63. Bradby, *op.cit.*
64. Thornton, *op.cit.*
65. Straw, 1991, *op.cit.*
66. Straw, 1993, *op.cit.*
67. Gilroy, *op.cit.*
68. Ray Pratt, "Popular Music, Free Space and the Quest for Community", *Popular Music and Society*, no 13, 1989, pp. 5-19; Christopher Small, *Music of the Common Tongue*. John Calder, London, 1987.